

incapacity) is essentially the 14th century one, and renders redundant any attempt to isolate an ahistorical or context-independent concept of disability, which might or might not contribute to a "unified theory of physical difference/disability".

This remark should not be taken as criticism of Tom Koch's important contribution, in his paper, to demonstrating what "medical" and "social" disability theorists have in common.³ It may be tilting at windmills moreover to imply that anyone actually believes in the possibility of isolating an ahistorical or context-independent concept of disability. But given the repeated efforts of many people over the years to come up with a watertight definition of health, one cannot be sure. So it may at least be worth asking what useful purpose is served by a concept of "disability", or *a fortiori* of "the disabled", which many people find unhelpful or even offensive. Clearly it is important, as R B Jones notes in his paper, to recognise the existence of specific impairments or disabilities whose effects may be ameliorated by medical treatment or environmental modification.⁶ But does gathering these different examples together into the conceptual hold-all of "disability", in practice assist, or hinder, their recognition and amelioration in specific instances?

In this context, it is worth recalling Goldstein's observation that "a definition of disease requires a conception of the individual nature as a starting point", and that regaining health involves the establishment of "a new individual norm" (in terms

of the relationship between organism and environment) in place of the former one. "Recovery is a newly achieved state of ordered functioning", he writes, and "being well means to be capable of ordered behaviour which may prevail in spite of the impossibility of certain performances which were formerly possible".⁷ In this respect, some individuals with perceived disabilities may in fact be healthier than other individuals without perceived disabilities—not simply because, subjectively or existentially, they regard themselves as healthy, but also because they have sufficient physiological reserves to be equal to the environmental challenges they face. And that, after all, is perhaps the most that any of us can hope for.

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